

## **In-service teachers' beliefs, perceptions and knowledge in the Nicaraguan EFL context**

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### **Abstract**

The following is the description of a research project carried out at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN-León). The study was undertaken at the English Department of the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Humanities of UNAN-León. One of the main programs of this Department is the Saturday English Program, which has been designed for in-service teachers who do not have the necessary academic qualifications to teach English as a Foreign Language<sup>2</sup>. The study involved 15 in-service teachers of this program. The main objective was to explore and analyze the teachers' knowledge, beliefs and perceptions concerning the teaching-learning process of EFL and the influence these elements exert on the teachers' performance and behavior in the classroom. The research was carried out devoting considerable attention to the context in which instruction was taking place. The results of this analysis led to a series of recommendations aimed at providing the teachers with the necessary tools for teaching English effectively within the Nicaraguan EFL context. The study also shed significant light on some important aspects for strengthening the Saturday English Program.

**Keywords:** teachers' thought, action research, teacher training, teacher development

### **Resumen**

El presente artículo describe un proyecto de investigación realizado en la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua (UNAN-León). El estudio fue llevado a cabo en el Departamento de Inglés de la Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación y Humanidades de la UNAN-León. Uno de los principales programas de este Departamento es el Programa de Inglés Sabatino que ha sido diseñado para profesores de inglés que no cuentan con la calificación académica necesaria para enseñar inglés como lengua extranjera. El estudio involucra a 15 profesores de este Programa. El objetivo principal era explorar y analizar el conocimiento, creencias y percepciones de los profesores en cuanto al proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) y la influencia que estos elementos ejercen en el comportamiento y las acciones de los profesores en el aula de clase. La investigación fue realizada tomando en consideración el contexto de los procesos de instrucción. Los resultados de este análisis arrojaron una serie de recomendaciones destinadas a proveer a los profesores de las herramientas necesarias para enseñar inglés con efectividad dentro del contexto educativo nicaragüense. El estudio también proveyó importantes elementos para el fortalecimiento del Programa de Inglés Sabatino.

**Palabras clave:** pensamiento del profesor, investigación-acción, formación del profesorado, desarrollo del profesorado

### **1. Introduction**

The current state of the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at secondary school levels in Nicaragua is an issue that deserves special attention, as it is an area with a number of significant problems. Some of the most substantial constraints are the lack of a consistent national curriculum, scarce didactic materials, lack of equipment and libraries, and large classes. The situation is worsened by the fact that a large number of

<sup>1</sup> This research project, part of a Doctorate program, was mentored by Fernando Cereza from the University of Alcalá.

<sup>2</sup> The Program was launched in 1993 within the framework of a Cooperation link between UNAN-León and the University of Alcalá.

English teachers are currently teaching without appropriate professional qualifications and training. All of these factors combined result in poor instructional quality.

There were two specific concerns related to the current situation of EFL teaching in Nicaragua underlying this investigation. Firstly, the phenomenon that after five years of English lessons three times a week during school years, students still do not manage to have appropriate proficiency levels at the end of their secondary studies. This situation places a heavy burden on teachers' shoulders, as they are attributed a great deal of responsibility in their students' final level of linguistic competence and proficiency. The second concern is the strong personal conviction that any substantial and far-reaching changes and attempts to improve the instructional processes should be carried out taking into account the teachers' perception, and with their active participation.

Based on this perception of the teachers' role, the study intended to contribute to understanding the complex and difficult world of EFL teachers in Nicaragua. The research was carried out with a group of 15 in-service teachers who were, at the time of the study, in the IV year of the Saturday English Program at UNAN. It concentrated on gaining substantial knowledge concerning the beliefs, assumptions and perceptions on which these teachers based their teaching practice. In addition, it aimed at examining teachers' knowledge base, and its possible connection with teachers' performance, and behavior in the classroom. A lot of attention was given to the teachers' situational contexts and to the multifaceted factors involved in the teaching-learning process, such as institutional policies, instructional settings, program, and didactic materials. Contextual issues exert powerful influence on the instructional processes in a number of different ways and, therefore, should not be undervalued if the world of language teachers is to be understood. As Bigelow and Walker (2003) accurately state "it is thus impossible to understand the full picture of a language teaching/learning situation and the participating learners...without fully comprehending the specific contexts...in which the event takes place". (Bigelow and Walker, 2003: 7). Regarding this it is important to point out that the study as a whole was based on a human and sympathetic perspective of the teachers' work within the characteristics of their situational contexts. That is to say, there was the implicit willingness and concern to vindicate EFL teachers in Nicaragua, praise their efforts, and assign due importance to their work, as they try to do their best while facing extremely difficult constraints and challenges.

## 2. Background studies

There was a previous large-scale study in the EFL area, which addressed the situation of EFL teaching in Nicaragua. Its scope was certainly much larger than the one of the present study. Nevertheless, it shared important elements covered by the present study worth exploring. This major effort was carried out by Tony and Michelle Luxon. The study was funded by the ODA ELT Project (ODA stands for Overseas Development Administration, a branch of the Foreign Office of the British government). It was carried out in 1993 jointly with two of the largest public universities: UCA and UNAN Managua, and with the Nicaraguan Association of English Teachers (ANPI). It also counted on the support of authorities of the Ministry of Education. Two general aims were the main focus of the research: to explore and find out the conditions in which EFL teaching was taking place at secondary school levels throughout the country, and to provide practical, feasible, and relevant solutions to the problems identified. The project involved 47 secondary schools, more than 60 teachers and 518 students. The data collection instruments included questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations.

Some of the most significant findings of the research related to the teachers' professional qualifications and performance. Out of the more than 60 teachers involved in the study, only 19 (27%) were graduates of a pedagogical training program. The great majority of teachers were unlicensed teachers. Nevertheless, the study showed no significant differences between graduates and unlicensed teachers, in terms of language proficiency and range and kinds of teaching techniques. Other important difficulties identified were the physical conditions of the classrooms, the lack of availability of resources and equipment, and the quality of the didactic materials. The prevailing means for language instruction used by teachers were chalk and the board. The national syllabus established was also identified as having significant constraints. It was based on the series of books *Pathways to English* (H.B. Allen et. al.1994). A number of problems concerning these textbooks were identified. Out of the series of six books, only books 1 to 3 were used. In fact, they were the basis of the whole English instruction for secondary school studies. There were not enough samples for all students, and there was a lack of enough samples of the teachers' edition for most teachers. In addition, the book is linguistically outdated (it has been around for more than 20 years now), and is unrelated to the Nicaraguan contextual reality.

There were also important findings regarding the characteristics of classroom instruction. Spanish was used most of the time, and the teaching processes were based on a teacher-centered approach. This approach was identified as being influenced by the teachers own experience as learners as they had the tendency to repeat their previous teachers' traditional roles and techniques (which was identified as the Craft Model). There were very few opportunities for students' interaction, free practice and production. Students' performance was based on lots of repetition drills that were used for pronunciation practice, and no real listening comprehension skills were involved whatsoever. As for the planning and implementation of the classes, they were not organized into clearly divided stages. Language items, grammatical structures and vocabulary were all presented, explained and exemplified on the board according to the sequence in the book, and students would do a lot of note taking.

After identifying the main problems, a feasibility study of the possible ways to address them was undertaken. Thus, it was decided that the most practical course of action was to promote and carry out changes and improvements in EFL teaching through the teachers. The plan of action involved providing teachers with the training they needed to work with the existing syllabus and materials. The main objective was to strengthen the in-service teachers' abilities to be able to cope with the scarce resources and limitations that they faced. For this purpose, a number of measures were taken in the second stage of the process. Although there were several major issues addressed by these measures, two of them are of particular interest for the scope of the present study. On the one hand, a number of teacher training sessions nationwide, which reached approximately 400 teachers from different regions and cities of the country, were planned and established. This process was known as the "Cascade Project" as teachers trained would then favor the training of their fellow teachers. On the other hand, the program offered by UNAN-Managua for unlicensed in-service teachers was reformed and improved.

### **3. Context of the research**

#### **3.1 The national socioeconomic conditions in Nicaraguan basic education**

Education in Nicaragua is a very complex issue since the country is currently going through a deep social crisis characterized by high levels of poverty, and corruption at government levels. The civil war, which ended in the 80's, and the subsequent establishment of different kinds of government have all caused several drastic sociopolitical changes that have exerted great influence on the educational processes. The lack of consistent measures and general indifference of the different governments in power have caused the deterioration of both primary and secondary educational systems in state schools in several important aspects. For instance, because

of policies in terms of budget allocations for the educational system, teachers were one of the worst paid sectors within the labor force in the country (the average salary of teachers in Nicaragua was at the time 5 times lower than in other Central American countries). In addition, there have been few significant efforts to increase the quality of the educational systems, build more and better-equipped schools, and provide the existing ones with appropriate, suitable, and updated didactic materials

### 3.2 The national educational context in EFL processes

The Ministry of Education of Nicaragua (MINED) was promoting a National Educational Plan (2002-2015) with the financial help of different world organizations and the participation of authorities from different educational sectors. A new program in EFL, based on both communicative competence and the educational philosophy of constructivism, was started as a pilot program in several schools in 2004. The program was not based on a particular textbook and had been designed to provide the teachers with the pedagogical support to develop their English classes. At the end of the year 2006, more than seventy schools nationwide were using this program. The predictions were that by 2007 all national schools would be implementing it as the framework for the ELT instructional processes. Nevertheless, because of changes of national educational authorities in 2006, the policies changed as well, and the process stopped. Nowadays, little is known of the new current policies for EFL language instruction.

Concerning the conditions of EFL in schools no major changes had taken place since the time of the Luxon's study. There was still a lack of consistency in the organization of EFL processes. There seemed to be more flexibility in the policies for ruling the instructional processes, as a reform process was taking place. Nevertheless, as no official guidelines had come out, there was some kind of "anarchy" going on. For example, private schools were allowed to establish their own criteria for the kind of English instruction and materials that they wanted. Since private schools have more financial resources, they were often able to devote efforts to purchase books. As a result, a number of varied and different English textbooks were being used in private schools nationwide. This was not a problem in itself, if there had not been diverse teaching approaches and lack of consistent educational policies in terms of curriculum. In public schools, the situation was quite different. In spite of the seeming flexibility of the current policies, the former national program was still being used in most schools. This program, based on the contents of the series *Pathways to English* as already mentioned, had the advantage that the teachers were familiar with it and that there were still samples available in some school libraries.

### 3.4 The Saturday English Program at UNAN-Leon

The Saturday English Program of UNAN-Leon is aimed at contributing to the professional training of unlicensed in-service teachers. It started in 1993 with the consistent support of the Spanish University of Alcalá, within the framework of a sister universities cooperation program. This link favored the creation of the English Department at UNAN, established the beginning of its Didactic Program, and provided academic support for the curriculum design of the Saturday Program, as well as bibliography and didactic materials. Over the first few years ever since it was launched, the study plan of this Program had some minor changes. In 2006, however, a major curriculum reform, intended to be implemented in the academic year 2007, took place. Up to the present date, more than 300 teachers from the western region of Nicaragua have enrolled in this program.

### 3.5 The course *Methodology in ELT I* and the target population

The curriculum plan of the Saturday English Program includes four components focused on methodological and didactic aspects. Out of these components, the course *Methodology in ELT I* (second semester of IV year) was

the framework of the present study. The nature of this course provided optimal grounds to establish close contact with the target population to explore their views. The development of the class and the research process went on jointly during the time that the data collection process lasted (July-December of 2005).

The target population belonged to the generation of students integrated into the Saturday English Program for the period 2002-2006. Out of the 27 students, only 15 were in-service teachers. These 15 in-service teachers were the focus of the study. The following table provides general information about them.

**Teachers' information**

<b>CODE</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>TEACHING EXPERIENCE</b>	<b>YEARS STUDYING ENGLISH</b>	<b>PLACE OF WORK</b>
<b>T-1</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>Urban area</b>
<b>T-2</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Rural area</b>
<b>T-3</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>Urban area</b>
<b>T-4</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>Urban area</b>
<b>T-5</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Urban area</b>
<b>T-6</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>Urban area</b>
<b>T-7</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>1 month</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Urban area</b>
<b>T-8</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Rural area</b>
<b>T-9</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>Rural area</b>
<b>T-10</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Urban area</b>
<b>T-11</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>2 months</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Rural area</b>
<b>T-12</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>Urban area</b>
<b>T-13</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Rural area</b>
<b>T-14</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Rural area</b>
<b>T-15</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>Urban area</b>

## **4. Research methodology**

### **4.1 Type of research: The ethnographic nature of the study**

The study was of an ethnographic, explorative and interpretive kind carried out based on a naturalistic, non-interventionist approach. The researcher tried to collect as much information as possible about the teachers' thoughts and their contextual realities without interfering in any of the processes observed and analyzed. The study shared an important feature of ethnographic studies in the sense that it was not an experimental study. According to Nunan, ethnography involves "the study of the culture/characteristics of a group in real-world rather than laboratory settings" (Nunan 1992: 55). Within this perspective, the researcher does nothing to alter, change or interfere in the observed phenomena. Implications, generalizations, and language theories emerge naturally from the researchers' close contact and observation of the subjects under study in context, a major issue underlying this study. In addition, a great deal of importance is given to the perceptions of the main agents involved: the ones of the researcher and of the subjects under study. As Wilson states, "human behavior cannot be understood without incorporating into the research the subjective perception and belief system of those involved in the research, both as researchers and subjects" (cited in Nunan 1992: 54). Indeed, during all steps of the study the teachers were asked to reflect on and to articulate their subjective perceptions and views concerning the different aspects analyzed as part of the research process. Likewise, the researchers' perceptions were systematically contrasted, confronted and compared with those of the in-service teachers throughout the research project.

## 4.2 Stages of the research

The research process was organized in two major stages, the first of which involved the activities carried out to collect the primary data for the study. These data collection activities took place in the second semester of 2005. During this time, the teachers attended 16 training sessions. The second stage was carried out during the first semester of 2006. This stage involved the main activities of the data analysis and exploration, including the categorization, analysis and interpretation of the data, the literature review, the collection of complementary or secondary information, and the writing of the research report.

## 4.3 Data collection instruments

The data collection instruments were valuable means for the exploration of the teachers' views and actions. Interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and classroom observations were all used. Overall, each instrument was designed to collect specific pieces of information. Nevertheless, each was also designed in order to have some kind of interrelation with the others. This was especially helpful to contrast and compare information from different perspectives for validity purposes.

## 5. Theoretical issues

Ethnographic studies assign great importance to the data collection process and its subsequent interpretation. Theory is arrived at through data analysis, exploration and interpretation. This process has been defined as "grounded theory." According to Nunan, ethnography has sometimes been defined as "data in search of a hypothesis." He admits that this statement is somehow "an exaggeration," as most of the time researchers have previous assumptions about the subjects and topic under study. However, he agrees with this statement in the sense that ethnography is characterized by an interaction between data and theory and that "questions and hypothesis often emerge during the course of the investigation, rather than beforehand" (Nunan 1992: 57). Based on this premise, some of the most important theoretical aspects that emerged were the following:

- *Effective Language Teaching* As the research explored the teachers' perceptions of teaching EFL and their actual performance in the classroom, there was a revision of some of the most important aspects related to effective teaching. This led to the exploration of elements regarded as accurate and central aspects of teaching such as lesson stages, effective presentation and practice, the role of teachers in planning and implementing lessons, and approaches to effective classroom management and interaction.
- *Current approaches recommended for teaching EFL* In order to have the reference elements to contrast the teachers' approaches to teaching EFL, some of the approaches viewed as effective and the theory underlying them were revised. Some of the most important aspects regarding conceptions in language teaching covered were the concept of language used for communication, communicative competence and the issue of learner-centered processes.
- *The teachers* included the revision of important internal aspects that determine largely the performance of teachers, and the reasons to analyze these aspects. Overall, it was determined what kind of elements are involved in teachers' thinking and beliefs, and what kind of influence teachers' qualities, professional qualification, knowledge, personalities and roles exert on the teaching-learning processes.
- *External factors* included some of the most important elements that exert great influence on the teachers' decision-making, or are related to their performance in the classroom such as institutional issues and the teaching context. In addition, the program and curriculum, the instructional material, and the importance of

the lesson plan were widely covered. Also, some relevant elements related to the learners and the elements they bring to the process were taken into account: e.g. their learning styles, motivation, and involvement in the learning process.

- *Teachers' professionalization* addressed the issue of how to provide teachers with the necessary tools they need to widen, change, and improve their teaching approaches in practice. In this concern, the issues of teacher training and teacher development were thoroughly covered, as well as important concepts such as reflective teaching, classroom observations, peer observation, teachers as researchers, and action research.

## 5. Research findings

The premise underlying the selection of information among the numerous data gathered was the relevance and interest of the information to the EFL area in Nicaragua. The data were categorized, sorted out and grouped according to the major issues under analysis. They are: the teachers' situational context, teacher's teaching philosophies and knowledge base of TEFL concepts, the main source of teacher's beliefs, teachers' approaches to lesson planning, and the nature of the teaching-learning processes.

### 5.1 Teachers and their situational contexts

On the whole, it was made evident that most teachers were strongly affected by the number of limitations of their situational contexts. The lack of formal and consistent guidelines in terms of the national program for EFL process was perceived as the major problem along with the unsuitability of the instructional materials. The book *Pathways to English* was still in use in most cases, either alone, or in combination with other books. In addition, in the majority of the cases, students did not have access to the original book (either *Pathways to English* or any of the other books in use) and access to photocopies was very limited.

Teachers' motivation and attitudes were perceived as major problems as well. This was not surprising taking into account that teachers did not get the financial retribution necessary to make ends meet. In several cases, they had to work two or even three shifts a day. The average monthly salary of a public EFL teacher at the time was between 1800 and 2000 cordobas (about 120 dollars). On the other hand, teachers' working loads were in many cases extreme, as most of them had to teach many hours, face different kinds of students, and be in charge of teaching large amounts of students per classroom. Given all of these facts, it was not surprising to identify lack of motivation as a major problem. It is certainly very difficult to be motivated if the resources are limited, the contextual conditions are not adequate, the work is extreme, and the salary is too low.

An underestimated perception of English within the institutions was perceived as a significant problem as well. Most teachers complained that not enough importance was given to the area, as English was not considered a priority. This fact was made more evident by the short time and frequency assigned to language instruction (3 forty-five-minute sessions a week) and by the lack of concern in providing adequate conditions (libraries and language labs) and equipment such as TV sets or tape recorders. The situation accurately reflected what Richards and Lockhart (1994) imply when they say that one of the aspects that any language program reflects is the "culture of the institution". This is to say, "The particular ways of thinking and doing things that are valued in the institution" (Richards and Lockhart 1994:32).

Also, the lack of due attention to the improvement of the area was evidenced by the poor concern for providing teachers with enough opportunities for teacher training. Teachers acknowledged the benefits of the Saturday English Program of UNAN as a good training opportunity, but they also stated that more help was

needed in order to achieve a more substantial improvement. They highlighted the lack of institutional support based on the difficulties they experience to participate in training courses such as the national conferences organized by ANPI once a year, or academic programs offered by national universities.

Another significant constraint was the way teachers' appraisal processes were organized. The term mostly used for this process in the Nicaraguan context is "supervisions". This in itself suggests positive processes. Nevertheless, the term has a negative connotation for teachers, since supervisions are most of the time aimed at providing judgmental feedback about their performance. The situation is aggravated by the fact that in most cases people who are not related to the area carry out this appraisal system. The external observers in charge are diverse: the director, sub-director, the school academic coordinator (also called supervisor), or even somebody from other disciplines (Spanish, for example).

Overall it was perceived that the institutional factors conditioned and limited teachers' performance significantly and exerted strong influence on the kind and quality of language instruction. These major problems equally affected teachers' range of action and decision making, the nature and characteristics of the processes, and students' acquisition of the language. Certainly, change and improvement in the EFL teachers' contextual conditions in Nicaragua is not in the teachers' hands.

## 5.2 Teacher's teaching philosophies and knowledge base of TEFL concepts

One of the main objectives of this study was to explore the teaching philosophy of the teachers and their background knowledge base of theoretical aspects in EFL teaching, and understand how these sustain and are consistent with their performance in the classroom. In general, the findings evidenced that most teachers' teaching philosophies were, for the most part, unconscious and undetermined. They did not have a clear, conscious idea of the principles underlying their teaching practice which made it difficult their initial identification. In order to be able to identify their teaching beliefs, teachers had to be led to reflection on their views concerning several important aspects regarding language teaching. Among others, the nature of language learning, the role of the mother tongue vs. the role of the target language, and the goal of language teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

Most teachers' identified their teaching philosophy as being influenced by the AL method and the Communicative Approach. Nevertheless, these views were in disagreement with their actual actions and performance in the classroom, as the approach observed in most cases was the Grammar Translation Method. Although paradoxical, this lack of consistency between what teachers believed and what they actually did was perceived as both encouraging and worrying. On the one hand, it was encouraging to know that deep inside teachers showed fondness of less traditional views of language teaching (a language should be used for communication, meaning is more important than form, grammar should be taught implicitly rather than explicitly). This suggests that most teachers were open to changes and innovations and that their current grammar based approach to teaching did not satisfy them. On the other hand, it was worrying to know that the Saturday English Program did not provide the teachers with the necessary knowledge base regarding teaching methods and approaches that helped them to achieve consistency between their beliefs and practice. Teachers' theoretical knowledge of EFL methods should be addressed with a critical perspective; not to prescribe any particular method as the best way to teach, or as something that should be used blindly and exclusively. Rather, they should be led to realize that the principles and techniques of particular methods might be useful for some teaching situation, but not for others. Ultimately, through this analytical perspective teachers will be able to construct their own language teaching theory. That is to say, they will be able to make well-informed decisions to integrate, combine, adopt or adapt optional teaching approaches autonomously.



Teachers' content knowledge of specialized terminology of language teaching was perceived as having significant gaps and constraints as well. This was made evident in their definition of terms, (method, task, activity, technique, syllabus, and curriculum) provided through a diagnostic test. In this concern the teachers' definitions often overlapped, mixed, and lacked deepness and accuracy in several cases. This particular finding clearly shows that teachers had not achieved appropriate competence in their knowledge base of the theoretical, practical and basic concepts regarding their teaching practice. As far as syllabus and curriculum are concerned, the situation was even more worrying as most teachers did not have an accurate perception of what each involves. The current situation of EFL in Nicaragua seems to indicate that very soon teachers might face the role of syllabus designers. It seems, however, that the teachers' current knowledge base would not allow them to address this challenge properly.

### 5.3 Main sources of teacher's beliefs

According to the results obtained, teachers' beliefs were perceived to stem from different sources. The culture of their particular institution and the degree of involvement that teachers were given in the organization of the instructional processes were considered to exert great influence. Teachers' involvement in what was to be taught was low, as their participation in the learning processes was limited in most cases to follow the guidelines established either by their institutions or by the national system. The latter identified as having serious problems and limitations (among others, the lack of a consistent language program and teachers' effective appraisal system).

On the other hand, teachers' beliefs were also perceived as being influenced by their experience of what works best and by their tendency to stick to "ritual behavior" and performance in the classrooms (Maingay, 1988: 118-119). This was considered to determine to a great extent the nature of the classroom activity and the teachers' performance and actions observed. In this sense, evidence was provided that the degree of teachers' decision making in the classroom events themselves was high, which is indeed encouraging. Certainly, teachers should be given a much more active participation in what is to be taught, but the fact that most of them had considerable degree of autonomy in how is to be taught is considered as generally positive. It suggests that there are high possibilities of room for change and improvement in the way the teachers articulate their thinking to provide effective classroom instruction, thus in the overall improvement of the instructional processes in EFL. Nevertheless, teachers need consistent help to carry out these changes and improvements effectively.

### 5.4 Teachers' approaches to lesson planning

Lesson planning is closely related to the degree of success or failure of a particular class. As Nunan and Lamb state "The potential success or relative failure of a lesson will often be determined by the...planning and preparation the teacher is able to devote to the lesson" (Nunan and Lamb, 1996: 43) The lesson plan is indeed a practical and useful tool for teachers, particularly for inexperienced ones, since it guides them to address the several aspects of a lesson and provides them with the opportunity to integrate changes as improvements.

According to the findings, lesson planning was another aspect that deserved special attention. On the whole, the teachers' approaches to plan their lessons were in most cases the result of their own efforts, which certainly have to be praised and acknowledged. The data revealed that ten out of the 15 teachers use their own format. The other five teachers use the format provided by their schools. In no cases teachers stated that they use the format provided by the MINED. This finding reveals that most teachers have considerable freedom to structure their lessons according to their own perception. This fact, in itself, is considered to be generally positive, as teachers' decision-making is high in this concern. Nevertheless, evidence was also provided that they need

## 5.5 The nature of the teaching learning processes

The limitations mentioned in 5.4 above concerning effective lesson planning were, obviously, more evidenced at the time of implementation. For instance, class time distribution was an issue as in most cases it was difficult to distinguish the different stages of the lesson. Moreover, in several cases the lessons were perceived as consisting of a long activity (usually revolving around the same language item) or several short ones without clear objectives and without further checking students' understanding.

On the other hand, teachers spent considerable class time providing students with difficult (and very often unclear) grammar explanations, and writing on the board. The teachers' talking time had a direct correlation with the nature and characteristics of the classroom activity observed, as in the majority of cases students' degree of involvement was limited to a very passive and receptive role. Interaction would follow the IRF approach - Initiation- Response-Feedback (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). According to this model, it is the teacher who initiates the interactional exchange (usually in the form of a question) one of the students answers, then the teacher provides feedback (assesses, corrects, comments) and initiates the next question (cited in Ur 1991: 226). This approach fostered the participation of the most advanced students. Nevertheless, the rest of the students' participation would be limited to be spectators who spent a lot of time copying in their notebooks or doing grammar exercises. With so little degree of students' involvement and participation in the development of the language learning processes, it is not surprising that they do not get adequate levels of language proficiency at the end of their secondary school studies.

Regarding the use of the target language, in most cases the medium of communication was the mother tongue and/or the target language with immediate translations into Spanish. The use of natural and comprehensible language was perceived to need further reinforcements as well. There were consequential shortcomings in some teachers' linguistic competence in pronunciation, accuracy, and fluency. This was perceived to exert great influence on the teachers' choice to use the mother tongue as they lacked self-confidence regarding their command of the target language. Because of this lack of language proficiency students were exposed to unnatural, inaccurate and unreal language in many cases.

## 6. Final conclusions and remarks

Overall, the findings of this study have shed significant light on the different areas where teachers need urgent help to improve their performance in and out the classroom. Teachers need to widen their knowledge base of TEFL concepts, be equipped with a critical understanding of language learning theories, methods and approaches, improve their linguistic skills, and expand their range of teaching techniques and activities with views to the improvement of the language learning processes at the classroom level. The need to improve the EFL instructional process through the teachers' own improvement is perceived as a pertinent and imperative endeavor.

The situational contexts were identified as major negative influencing sources on teachers' thinking, behavior and decision making in and out of the classroom. Thus, it is highly important to find out effective alternatives to carry out teachers' improvement taken into account the powerful effect of context on teachers' range of action. Johnson (2000) recognizes this influence as well as the challenges imposed to teachers by their specific contexts. She highlights how important it is that teacher preparation programs "create structures to enable teachers to work within and around the settings where they find themselves" and, "implement alternative professional development experiences for teachers so as to enable them to look beyond local obstacles" (Johnson, 2000:5).

These insights lead to several reflections with important implications for academic teacher education programs in Nicaragua. In this sense it is worth asking: Are we Nicaraguan universities really creating these enabling structures? To what extent are our ELT programs providing teachers with the professional alternatives for development they need for effective language instruction? How do we address the important issue of teachers' contextual knowledge base with views to their empowerment? How can our teacher education programs foster teacher development within the existing contextual conditions? What elements are needed in order to help teachers so that they become competent, well equipped agents that promote improvement and change within their particular teaching situations? Indeed, all of these questions that have been brought forth by the present study are worth exploring. In fact, they are highly recommended as further areas of research. I strongly believe that finding the answers to these questions and acting accordingly will foster sustainable teacher development in the secondary EFL area in Nicaragua.

On the other hand, since the current contextual conditions in Nicaragua have been identified as major constraints affecting teachers' effective work, the present research report would not be complete without making further comments in this regard. Moreover, not doing so would be a significant gap in the main conclusions of this study. Two major issues concerning the contextual conditions will be emphasized. Firstly, that the efforts (unfortunately stopped at the moment) made by the national educational authorities to conduct a curriculum reform process in the EFL area are perceived as very positive and pertinent. As identified by the present study the major and most disturbing contextual constraint that teachers' face is the lack of consistent curriculum guidelines. Certainly, relevant and deep curriculum changes are needed in the EFL area. The obvious reason is

that we have dealt with an inappropriate curriculum plan that has proven to be ineffective for more than 20 years. The time has certainly come to promote and establish better and more effective curriculum policies to regulate the teaching/learning EFL process at secondary school levels in Nicaragua. It is well known that the efforts made resulted in a document with pedagogical suggestions and that these efforts involved the investment of considerable financial resources and the participation and collaboration of different stakeholders from the academic EFL world in Nicaragua. Moreover, the Ministry of Education of Nicaragua was promoting teacher training workshops so that teachers could be better prepared to face the curriculum reform process. There was an open call so that Nicaraguan universities offering ELT programs provided the pertinent training. The participation of academics from national universities in the improvement of the EFL teachers' teaching skills and knowledge was, indeed, an accurate measure. Overall, the joint effort being promoted suggests that national educational authorities identified and prioritized EFL learning as a very important area for the development of the country. It is highly recommended to give a follow up to this initiative by carrying out a wider consultation process of the resulting curriculum policies, and by undertaking the necessary piloting and evaluation to refine the curriculum proposal. In such a process the participation and involvement of the teachers should be consistently taken into account. By doing so, important meaningful changes and improvements can be achieved in the area.

Secondly, given the number of limitations and problems identified by the present study, regarding the situational contexts, national authorities and educational institutions cannot put aside important factors such as the physical conditions of the schools, the instructional materials, and the resources and equipment available. Certainly, curriculum issues cannot be separated from the contextual conditions provided for the instructional processes. More importantly, the teachers' professional treatment, assigned workloads, appraisal systems, and financial retribution should not be undervalued, as their performance is highly conditioned and determined by the combination of all of these factors. The efforts should be aimed at addressing these problems as well, if quality in the intended changes in EFL teaching-learning processes is to be achieved.

To conclude this report, it must be acknowledged that the study as a whole has been a very enriching and rewarding experience at both professional and personal levels. Professionally speaking, the study has represented a difficult and significant challenge given the complexity of its scope and the variety of factors involved. Nevertheless, the exploration of the processes, the attempts to find answers and explanations to the teachers' views and actions, and the search of theoretical aspects that could shed some light on the many aspects unfolded and analyzed, have all represented significant sources of professional development. On the other hand, the contributions of the study at personal levels stem directly from its human dimension. That is to say, the close contact and relationship with the teachers, and the findings regarding their problems and needs contributed to higher levels of empathy and identification with them. Moreover, the realization of the teachers' genuine desire to improve and give their best in spite of the number of problems they face has been an enlightening and life-enhancing experience.

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Received 4-3-2007 / Accepted 7-6-2007